

# Supporting Elders in Crisis

*Helping the Helper*



**A**t eighty, Edith\* was poor ... and alone. Her husband and her only child had both passed on – “gone to be with God’s people,” as Edith put it. She lived in Oregon in a boarding house. Then Edith somehow discovered that the Catholic Diocese in Rhode Island needed her help. She wasn’t clear on the details.

For several weeks, Edith wandered the country – airport to airport, city to city. Her credit card, most likely a “rainy day” relic from years gone by, had to have maxed out long before she arrived at Green. She had with her only a purse and a plastic bag crammed with hotel and food receipts and vouchers.

The airport police found her wandering about in the pre-dawn hours, long after the last flight in. She wanted to rent a car to go to the Catholic Diocese to help. Imagining

her lost and wandering behind a wheel, the airport police called the Rhode Island Department of Elderly Affairs (DEA) emergency hotline (462-0555). Diane Lewis, a Family Service of Rhode Island elder services clinician, immediately responded.

Pleasant and cooperative, Edith sat in an airport wheelchair in a tidy polyester dress, sensible shoes, and thick cotton stockings – looking like a sweet lost soul from an earlier time. She was happy to tell Diane who she was and answered correctly when asked where she was, the year, and the President’s name. She agreed to go with Diane to Rhode Island Hospital to make sure she was all right.

“People are surprised that many elders don’t have family and end their days alone and lonely like Edith,” Diane explains. “Because she appeared reasonable, busy people at the airlines and hotels probably just passed her on, not realizing she was in real trouble. Edith couldn’t make realistic decisions. She was so trusting; she was fortunate to have made it to Rhode Island unharmed.”

We interceded with the Oregon long-term care ombudsman and Edith is now safely back home. But now she is living in an appropriate senior care facility, with programs and activities she can enjoy and the services she needs.

Our statewide Elders in Crisis program grew out of the Police Go Team, a partnership with the Providence police to help children who were witnesses or victims of violence.

## Mayor Cicilline Builds Brighter Futures for Children

**O**n Tuesday, October 23, Providence Mayor David N. Cicilline receives the annual Brighter Futures Award from Family Service of Rhode Island for his work improving the well being of children.

“Mayor Cicilline is a national leader on issues affecting children and their families,” said Margaret Holland McDuff, Family

Service of Rhode Island CEO. “From his first day in office, he had placed a strong emphasis on after-school programming. He has also been extremely supportive of our partnership with the police department to assist children traumatized by violence.” Family Service of Rhode Island staff are called in by police 24/7 to provide counseling and other support, and staff also do regular “ride alongs” in police cruisers to intervene on the beat as necessary.

The Brighter Futures Award is presented yearly to an individual or organization improving the lives of children in Rhode Island.



Brighter Futures Award artwork by Anne Mimi Sammis

\* Photo and some details are representative, based on actual case.

# Agency Serving Aquidneck Island

**D**id you know that Family Service of Rhode Island provides services to help children and adults in crisis at three locations on Aquidneck Island?

The agency has established partnerships with Lucy's Hearth, a homeless shelter in Middletown; the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center in Newport; and the Florence Gray Center in Newport.

At Lucy's Hearth, Family Service of Rhode Island is providing clinical and non-clinical staff; financial, technology and human resources management; and grant-writing services.

"Lucy's Hearth is a beloved organization on Aquidneck Island, and we are very pleased to work with them in partnership to improve the lives of homeless children and their moms," said Margaret Holland McDuff, Family Service of Rhode Island CEO.

At the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center in Newport the agency maintains a small office as a base for outreach to troubled families. "Need overwhelms the capacity of local social services," Holland McDuff said, "which is why we've stepped up our presence on Aquidneck Island. And finding the

services you need can be a daunting problem, especially if you're impoverished or struggling with mental health or substance abuse issues."

The agency recently opened a small office at the Florence Gray Center in Newport, thanks to a partnership with the Newport Housing Authority. The

office serves people living at the site of the former Tonomy Hill public housing complex, which has been renovated and renamed Newport Heights. Services include crisis intervention, counseling and parent workshops.

Family Service of Rhode Island is a member of the

Newport County Chamber of Commerce as well as the Newport Partnership for Families, a consortium of public and private agencies concerned with services to children and families in Newport and nearby towns. "We're committed to being a part of the community as much as possible," said Holland McDuff. "We're even trying to staff our locations with Aquidneck Island residents – so we're providing jobs on the island for island residents."

The agency hopes to open a larger office on the island in the near future.

*"Need overwhelms the capacity of local social services, which is why we've stepped up our presence on Aquidneck Island."*

*—Margaret Holland McDuff*



Several Aquidneck Island foundations have provided grants to help us turn this vision into reality.

## Supporting Elders in Crisis

[continued from front]

Sergeant William Mirandi, head of the Special Victims Unit, asked us to respond for vulnerable elders, those alone without reliable family, and of course, we did.

"It was May 2004, an older woman – 88 years old," Mirandi says, recalling that first incident. "We found her standing outside in nothing but a housecoat. Water was coming from her house; a pipe had burst. It's Saturday, who are you going to call? The Police Go Team was there in 14 minutes. They were so compassionate; they took her to the hospital and stayed with her for 14 hours until her situation was all right."

That first call led to more calls for elder abuse, neglect, and other elders in crisis. Recently, we entered into a contract with DEA to respond to all after-hour calls to the elder emergency hotline statewide. Calls to

the hotline – 462-0555 – may be made by anyone suspecting elder abuse or neglect or that an elder may be in crisis.

*"Edith couldn't make realistic decisions. She was so trusting; she was fortunate to have made it to Rhode Island unharmed."*

*—Diane Lewis*

Demands for statewide emergency response have also led to new partnerships

with the Rhode Island Red Cross, the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families, the Rhode Island Department of the Attorney General, and the East Providence police. We are first responders for the Providence and Rhode Island Emergency Management Teams and certified members of the Rhode Island Critical Incident Stress Management team.

Other projects to address the emergency and non-emergency needs of children, families and now elders are in development.

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# Helping to Fix a Vulnerable System

Anybody who's been reading the *Providence Journal* or watching the news on TV over the last few years is aware that Rhode Island's Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF) has been struggling. In one of the most dramatic and tragic incidents, about two years ago a child who had been placed in the care of relatives was killed by them. After that terrible event, the state's Child Advocate's Office made a thorough investigation and presented a series of recommendations to improve foster care and relative placements in the state.

Although Family Service of Rhode Island has not been involved in any similar incidents, as a DCYF contractor, we are very aware of the vulnerability of clients in the foster care system and of the system itself. We continue to work with DCYF and other partners toward improving the safety and effectiveness of foster care in Rhode Island, for children in our

care and those whose cases are handled by other agencies.

Family Service of Rhode Island provides intensive *therapeutic* foster care for children with severe mental or behavioral health issues who have been removed from their families. Every child is assigned a staff clinician, who will see the child at least weekly – as often as daily if the need is severe. In addition, each foster family – after receiving comprehensive training from the agency – is assigned a staff case manager, to help them manage issues around living with and caring for foster children with special needs. Our foster care staff are on-call for the children and their foster families 24/7/365. This system of intensive support has reduced disrupted placements almost 70% over the last four years.

As the crisis within the foster care system became apparent, we moved to more intensively partner with DCYF on behalf of vulnerable children. We restructured our coverage to

ensure we were able to respond at once to emergency calls for placement. We were a key contributor in the design of a model program to provide needed respite for the families who care for troubled children. In Washington County, we are working with DCYF toward ensuring that all relatives who provide foster care to children removed from their parents are licensed, and to intervene in DCYF placements at risk of disruption.

Family Service of Rhode Island provides quality treatment and care for the 25 children currently placed in our foster-parent program. We have a history of innovative projects and close collaboration with DCYF and other providers. We recognize the challenges faced by DCYF and the foster care system, and see it as critical to continue to improve our partnerships and to support efforts statewide to provide safe, therapeutic, appropriate care to all children in DCYF placement.

## Agency Receives Community Awards

Family Service of Rhode Island recently received two awards, recognizing us for our support of low-income urban youth and for our efforts to improve the quality of life of our staff.

Year Up is a one-year intensive training program that provides urban young adults (ages 18-24) in Boston/Cambridge, Providence, Washington, DC, and New York City, with a combination of hands-on skill development, college credits, and corporate apprenticeships. The Providence program, which began in 2005, was the first expansion outside of Boston for the now seven-year-old initiative. Family Service of Rhode Island works with Year Up Providence by providing case management and other services for seven youths during their Year Up enrollment. On August 1, 2007, Year Up Providence presented Family Service of Rhode Island the Urban Empowerment Award in recognition of the agency's support of Ocean State youth and families and our extensive network of partnerships with other non-profits, businesses, and health care organizations.

The agency was also a winner of the 2007 Alfred P. Sloan Awards for Business Excellence in Workplace Flexibility – one of seven honorees (non-profit and for-profit) in the greater Providence area. The award, presented by the Families and Work Institute, recognizes employers that successfully use workplace flexibility to meet the goals of both the employer and its employees. Family Service of Rhode Island and its six co-winners were honored by the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce at a ceremony in downtown Providence on October 11.



Staff of Family Service of Rhode Island's Trauma, Intake & Emergency Services (TIES) department with the Urban Empowerment Award from Year Up Providence. L-R, Dr. Susan Erstling, Senior VP of TIES; Elizabeth Rutkowski, clinician; Carolina Dominguez, case manager; Tiana Ochoa, intake coordinator; Alexandra Batista, intake coordinator.



Alfred P. Sloan Award for Business Excellence in Workplace Flexibility

# Open Your Heart and Home to a Foster Child

All across Rhode Island there are children who need foster homes. Whether due to physical abuse, mental health problems, or a family emergency, sometimes a foster home is the best answer. Sometimes it is the only answer.

Family Service of Rhode Island is always looking for individuals and families to take in a needy or troubled child.

Foster parents receive the support of a team of clinicians and case managers, available 24/7/365, responding to any phone call within ten minutes. The



program has almost no turnover in staff, so experienced, well trained professionals work with the children and their foster families. Foster parents receive a tax-free stipend to support the placement, plus a clothing allowance and free medical coverage for the child. Many of the children who need placement are school age. Occasionally there are younger children.

For more information about Family Service of Rhode Island's foster parent program and how to get involved, please call Greg Wright at 401.331.1350.



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